

# ***Part Two: Strategic Approach - Context and Principles***

## **2.1 Context for this Strategy**

This Strategy provides a framework for implementing salinity management actions across the Basin, including those associated with the *National Action Plan (NAP) for Salinity and Water Quality* and State salinity initiatives, under a 15-year program of action.

### **2.1.1 National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality**

The NAP was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments on 3 November 2000. It is a seven year national framework that targets salinity and water quality protection with the joint resources of the Commonwealth, State and territory Governments backed by an over-arching *Inter-Governmental Agreement*. The Agreement requires that the implementation of the NAP will be consistent with the multilateral approach under this strategy to ensure that Basin-wide and interstate issues are adequately addressed.

The NAP targets nine priority regions in the Basin for addressing salinity and water quality issues. Other Commonwealth natural resources management initiatives, this Strategy, and State salinity initiatives will direct resources to NAP regions and also to regions outside of the NAP regions.

### **2.1.2 Basin ICM Policy Statement**

The *Murray-Darling Basin Integrated Catchment Management Policy Statement (ICM)* states the high-level goals and principles within the commitment that community and Governments will 'do all that needs to be done to manage and use the resources of the Basin in an ecological sustainable way' (see inside back cover).

The *ICM Policy Statement* sets standards for all new Basin strategies. This Strategy is the first to be developed according to the standards, and it will:

- be recognisably part of a larger setting, showing links to other strategies and plans at national, Basin, State and catchment levels, and links with actions addressing other issues;
- be based on a clear set of principles;
- have clearly defined priority actions and locations for attention at Basin, State and catchment levels, for delivery through and in support of catchment strategies and action plans;
- take account of the economic, environmental and social contexts within which the Strategy must operate, and of the economic, environmental and social impacts of the Strategy;

- have clear, achievable and measurable targets and timeframes;
- outline the mechanisms for achieving targets;
- have mechanisms for defining options and managing trade-offs between conflicting interests;
- define roles, responsibilities and accountabilities; and outline the skills and capacities required to meet these responsibilities and accountabilities;
- include practical monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes; and
- include provision for reviewing and revising the Strategy to learn from successes and failures.

### **2.1.3 Basin Salinity Management Strategy**

Under the Murray-Darling Basin Initiative, the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council (MDBMC) has responsibility for whole-of-Basin outcomes, while the States in partnership with regions are responsible for within-valley outcomes. These responsibilities are reflected throughout this Strategy.

Specifically, Council will adopt end-of-valley and Basin targets, which will cap rising salinity from all catchments and thus protect values and assets Basin-wide. The NAP, this Strategy and State salinity initiatives will each adopt the same targets with the Council receiving annual reports and ensuring accountability arrangements to meet the objectives of this Strategy.

Catchment plans will be expected to meet the requirements of the NAP, this Strategy and State initiatives, requiring that they quantify their salinity effects at the target sites and on the Commission's salinity registers, and meet Basin reporting and auditing requirements. Salinity registers are discussed in more detail below in section 3.9.

### **2.1.4 State salinity initiatives**

All of the Basin States have introduced new salinity initiatives. These initiatives, while focussed on whole-of-state and within-valley actions, will contribute to meeting Council adopted end-of-valley and Basin targets, and will also meet the requirements of the NAP bilateral agreements.

The State initiatives are listed below. More details are available from documents prepared by the relevant States.

*This Strategy provides a framework for implementing national and State salinity actions across the Basin.*



Consistent with its responsibility for Basin outcomes, MDBMC will adopt end-of-valley and Basin targets, which will be the same for the NAP, this Strategy, and State initiatives.



### New South Wales

NSW released *Taking on the Challenge: NSW Salinity Strategy* in August 2000. Its objective is to slow down the rate of increase in salinity within 10 years, to meet targets reflecting salinity levels that the State is prepared to live with and can afford. Catchment management boards have been given the task of reviewing and making recommendations on interim end-of-valley targets.

### Victoria

Victoria released its *Salinity Management Framework: Restoring our Catchments* in August 2000. The document confirms that review of salinity management plans is vitally important in order to capitalise on new information. Catchment management authorities have prime responsibility for this review.

### South Australia

South Australia released its *South Australian River Murray Salinity Strategy* in June 2001. Within principles consistent with this Strategy and the NAP, it requires that salinity arising from irrigation will not impact on the River Valley, that regional groundwater discharge from the cleared Mallee districts towards the river valley will be managed, and that the health of the floodplain and wetlands along the Murray corridor will be protected and enhanced. Improved knowledge will be developed and applied to the catchment planning and decision processes.

In addition, South Australia has a State-wide Dryland Salinity Strategy that applies to the South Australian sector of the Basin where rising water tables are affecting the productive land systems around the lower lakes, Coorong, and Eastern Mount Lofty Ranges.

### Queensland

Queensland will deliver ICM outcomes, including minimisation of salinity, through existing initiatives including vegetation management, water reform and improved land management practices. Salinity science workplans are being developed which support community groups in their development and implementation of strategies to address salinity and water quality. Both salinity and water-quality outcomes will be delivered within the framework of integrated catchment management and the NAP. Meanwhile, Queensland has committed itself to accountabilities and responsibilities for implementing this Strategy and the *ICM Policy Statement*.

### 2.1.5 Regional salinity plans

Under the NAP, this Strategy, and State salinity initiatives, regional organisations will develop salinity or catchment management plans that will cover among other things, performance measures, agreed outcomes, accountability and reporting mechanisms and compliance measures.

It is expected that, once a plan has been accredited under the NAP, it will meet the requirements of this Strategy and State initiatives and consequently attract an appropriate level of investment from Governments and the communities. As there is broad consistency between the requirements of the NAP, this Strategy and State salinity initiatives, this will ensure that plans and resources for regions outside the NAP will be consistent with those for regions covered by the NAP.

## 2.2 Basin strategic approach

Under this Strategy, the partner Governments are committing to the following nine elements of strategic action, to be implemented over the next 15 years:

- developing capacity to implement the Strategy;
- identifying values and assets at risk;
- setting salinity targets;
- managing trade-offs with the available within-valley options;
- implementing salinity and catchment management plans;
- redesigning farming systems;
- targeting reforestation and vegetation management;
- constructing salt interception works; and
- ensuring Basin-wide accountability: monitoring, evaluating, and reporting.

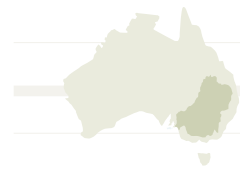
As part of this action, the Commission will manage a comprehensive knowledge generation program, coordinate and enhance further research and development (R&D) on farming and forestry systems, construct and operate salt interception schemes, further develop the vegetation bank concept and establish Basin-wide monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements.



Griffith NSW

NSW Agriculture

*This Strategy interprets and applies the ICM Policy Statement principles to salinity management.*



## 2.3 Principles

The partner Governments have agreed to the principles outlined below. This Strategy interprets and applies the ICM principles (see inside back cover) to salinity management, and this interpretation forms the basis for the partner Governments' commitment to and involvement in its delivery.

### 2.3.1 Interpreting the ICM Policy Statement

#### Inclusiveness

This Strategy supports the ICM principles of integration and informed decision making by committing to an inclusive, integrated catchment management approach to salinity planning, management and implementation.

#### Community/Government partnerships

This Strategy supports the principle of transparency by committing to community/Government partnerships that are open about how to achieve outcomes and what is expected from each partner. There is an expectation that communities and industry will actively participate in salinity management planning and implementation, and meet their duty of care to avoid actions that worsen salinity impacts.

### 2.3.2 Specific to this Strategy

#### Accountability

This Strategy supports the ICM principle of accountability by continuing States' accountability for future actions that was a key

feature of the *S&D Strategy*, and from 1 January 2000 includes Queensland under this principle. The *S&D Strategy* obliged NSW, Victoria and South Australia to be accountable for offsetting the salinity impacts of actions implemented after 1 January 1988 that significantly affect river salinity as measured at Morgan.

Within this Strategy, accountability is provided through the end-of-valley Report Cards and targets, the Commission Salinity Registers for the Basin, salinity credits and debits, and participation in a program of joint salt interception works. States in breach of this principle will be answerable to Council. There will five-yearly audits, assessing impacts on river salinity.

#### Responsibility

This Strategy commits the partner Governments to accept shared responsibility for further action to meet the Basin salinity target as measured at Morgan (less than 800 EC for 95 per cent of the time at Morgan) over 15 years.

In making this commitment, they are accepting a shared responsibility to address the legacy of history by ensuring that the combined State total of the Commission Registers remains in balance or in surplus. If a State's contribution to the total of the Commission Registers goes into deficit then this will trigger an exception report to Council (with the Commission providing advice on proposed action to bring the account into balance or in surplus).

*This Strategy differentiates between responsibility to address the 'legacy of history', and accountability to offset the salinity impacts of 'future actions'.*



### The 'legacy of history' and 'future actions'

Throughout this Strategy, reference is made to the 'legacy of history' and 'future actions'. This Strategy differentiates between accountability to offset the salinity impacts of future actions and responsibility to offset the future salinity impacts of past actions (the 'legacy of history').

'Future actions' are typically works or measures with salinity implications undertaken after 1 January 1988 by NSW, Victoria and South Australia, and from 1 January 2000 by Queensland. Future impacts of past actions or the 'legacy of history' refers to the inevitable future salinity impacts which occur after 1 January 2000 as a result of actions or decisions undertaken before 1 January 1988 by NSW, Victoria and South Australia, and before 1 January 2000 by Queensland.

### Sharing benefits and costs

Under this Strategy, current landholders will not be expected to individually accept responsibility for the future impacts of past actions. However, the impacts are real and need to be dealt with. Collectively, past and current landholders, and society as a whole, are represented by today's Governments.

That is not to say that today's Governments automatically have to address the whole problem from within current resources. Rather, this Strategy requires them to establish a decision making regime in which the appropriate trade-offs are carefully considered, remedial measures are agreed multi-laterally and the allocation of salinity credits generated by joint works reflects cost sharing arrangements.

The Strategy also acknowledges that the social impacts of the various salinity management options need to be considered, and that responsibility should be shared across generations as well as localities. Furthermore, it recognises that communities in the more salt-affected regions or localities should not have to bear all the costs of intervention.

To most effectively handle this shared responsibility, the partner Governments have agreed to a further joint program of salt interception works to achieve a reduction of at least 46 EC, and potentially up to 61 EC, in average river salinity at Morgan (to offset the 'legacy of history' and provide salt disposal entitlements for future actions) within seven years. In an evolutionary step from past practice, the partner Governments have agreed to a series of cost sharing and benefit allocation principles

under current flow regimes (i.e., the Cap on diversions). These are listed below in section 3.8.

In summary, the joint works program will offset those 'legacy of history' effects, which are not offset by in-valley actions in the first seven years, with the Commonwealth's credits directed towards offsetting the 'legacy of history', and possibly future actions that provide environmental and social benefits.

### Optimal investments

This Strategy supports the ICM principles of efficiency and full accounting by committing to investment in salinity based on a full and proper assessment of all the benefits and costs (economic, environmental, and social) within the valleys and downstream. Investment will proceed where the sum of all benefits exceeds the sum of all costs. This recognises that there have to be limits to the levels of investment in protection and that these limits will vary within and between river valleys and States.

### Balanced decisions

This Strategy further supports the ICM principles of efficiency and full accounting by committing the states and valley communities to taking balanced decisions and making careful trade-offs between a range of salinity management options including, but not necessarily limited to, those discussed below in section 3.4.

For example, trade-offs will need to be made between engineering options that provide immediate salinity benefits but treat the symptoms not the causes, landscape change options that treat the cause but provide longer-term and less certain benefits, and flow management options that can provide immediate salinity benefits (e.g., dilution flows) but can affect availability of water for irrigation and environmental purposes.

In practice, the States and their communities will achieve the end-of-valley and Basin salinity targets through a changing balance of engineering, landscape change and flow management options, that reflects their relative costs and prevailing social values.

## 2.4 Commitment to this Strategy

### 2.4.1 Council endorsement

This Strategy was requested by Council following its consideration of the *Basin Salinity Audit* in 1999. It has been developed by the partner

Governments and Basin communities through a lengthy process of informed debate and consultation, based on the *Draft Basin Salinity Management Strategy* released in September 2000. This Strategy provides a comprehensive, strategic and well thought out approach to the most challenging environmental issue facing the Basin and the nation.

In endorsing this Strategy in March 2001, and its major policies including salinity targets, accountability, salinity credits and debits, redesigning farming systems, further development of the vegetation bank concept and joint salt interception works, Council has signalled that it is prepared to take decisive action.

#### 2.4.2 Implementing Council's decision through the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement

The Murray-Darling Basin Initiative is the partnership between the Governments and Basin communities that has been established to give effect to the *Murray-Darling Basin Agreement (MDBA)*. The purpose of the Agreement is 'to promote and coordinate effective planning and management for the equitable, efficient and sustainable use of the water, land and other environmental resources of the Murray-Darling Basin.'

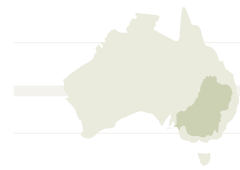
This purpose is achieved through Council considering and determining major policy issues such as salinity, and developing, considering and authorising measures to address those issues. This Strategy is the Council's 15-year response to salinity, and its key elements will be given a statutory basis in a revised Schedule C to the Agreement. The Commission will be responsible for implementing this Strategy within the terms of the Agreement and Schedule C.

#### 2.4.3 Drafting a revised Schedule to the Agreement

The accountability arrangements of this Strategy will be enshrined in a revised Schedule C to the Agreement, which builds on the current Schedule in the following ways:

- consideration of works and measures Basin-wide;
- including Queensland in accountability arrangements, with 1 January 2000 as the effective date;
- responsibility for 'legacy of history' effects, with 1 January 2000 as the effective date, for all partner Governments;
- targets for each tributary valley and the shared rivers at Morgan;
- a new joint works program, to address the 'legacy of history' and provide salt disposal entitlements (SDEs);
- revised cost sharing and salinity credit allocation for Victoria, NSW, South Australia and the Commonwealth, under the new joint works program;
- provisions for Queensland to participate in the joint works program, if required, after five years of Strategy implementation;
- integration of the credits and debits of the previous S&D Register into the new Commission A and B Registers of this Strategy;
- provision for annual reporting by States to the Commission, and review and audit of actions on the Commission Registers at least once every five years; and
- provision for exception reporting to Council and obligations for the partner Governments to be brought to account.

*This Strategy's key elements and accountability arrangements will be given a statutory basis in a revised Schedule C to the Agreement.*



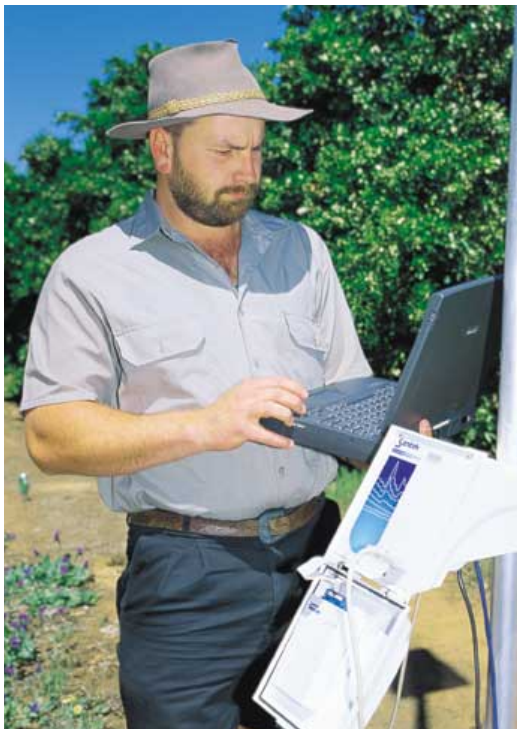
Emerging dryland salinity - Central West

Peter Solness/Network Photographers



NSW Agriculture (Stuart McMahon)

Property planning



NSW Agriculture

Water-table testing



NSW Agriculture (Simon Gibbs)

Mapping salinity